

Morning Conferences: From Dialogue to the Sacrificial Rite and the Formation of Scapegoats¹

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Abstract: In order to achieve the objectives of transparency and accountability, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) has offered a press conference every morning since he took office. This situation seemed to be a transcendental change in the field of democratic dynamics and political communication in Mexico; however, not merely a means of communication, these conferences have instead become a method of government. Using postulates of Mimetic Theory, this essay analyzes AMLO's conferences, showing how this daily practice has become propaganda for the regime.

Keywords: scapegoat, Morning Conferences, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, neoliberalism

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1. The “Mañaneras” (Morning Conferences) of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador

From the first day of his government, on December 1, 2018, President López Obrador offered a conference in the morning. He indicated that this would, in the interests of transparency and accountability, inaugurate a new method of informing citizens about the actions of his government. In other words, he affirms that the conferences, which are popularly called “mañaneras,” will answer questions about government decisions or about political situations in general. This seemed to be a complete change in the democratic and political communication dynamic, unprecedented in Mexico, compared to Enrique Peña Nieto who, throughout his six-year term, agreed to give a press conference on rare occasions.

At first, the morning conferences were seen as opportunities for dialogue with the specialized press, as happens in the White House conferences in which questions are asked based on data and precise sources according to the topics to be discussed. This dialogue in the White House and in Congress becomes an important benchmark for journalism in the United States and reporters constantly give the note by asking questions that tend to bother power, as has rarely been seen in Mexico, but the dynamics itself in the morning conference is not designed to foster this dialogue.

According to the polls, the morning conferences enjoy great popularity among wide sectors of the population. In that sense, they are a propaganda success. In their best moments, 69% of the Mexican citizens surveyed have “approved” the morning conferences. At its worst, that approval has been close

to 50%. On the other hand, the rejection of this form of communication has never exceeded 25% (Riva). However, from other angles, the morning conferences have been widely criticized. Luis Cárdenas, political and economic commentator for the newspaper *El Universal*, considers:

The romantic idea of the State is very well painted in the morning conference, a circular dialogue, a people that speak freely with its president who, noble, understanding and pro-man listens to his people and protects them by making the best decisions, always agreed through communication, almost magical, of him with the whole mass. However, it is just that: a romantic idea, a caricature, an illusion that is limited to living in [a...] world of [...] fantasy.

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the framework of the morning conferences, which have become propaganda for the regime. On November 27, 2019, the president of the Specialized Regional Chamber of the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judicial Power, Gabriela Villafuerte, presented a ruling that affirmed that “morning conferences are government propaganda” (EMD Staff). For his part, prior to this ruling, the director of the newspaper *Excelsior*, Pascal Beltrán del Río, wrote:

For the first time since the conference—yesterday’s, number 123—was held, it was not broadcast on channels 11, 14, and 22 or on government websites and social networks. This is based on the decision of the INE (National Electoral Institute), adopted when there is less than a week left for the local elections in six states, after a complaint presented by the PAN [...].

Surely the wide sleeve that the government has had for the transmission of the morning conference during the first semester of the six-year term will begin to be limited, as the propaganda nature of this unprecedented communication exercise is put to debate. (“Bajan”)

By its nature, propaganda is not only made up of truths, but also of simplifications, half-truths, unverifiable statements and even lies. Propaganda contrasts with the terrain of specialists and technocrats, made up of accurate data. The propaganda/technocracy dyad up until a few years was not usually problematic. It was not a dichotomy. There were simply different moments and spaces for propaganda and different ones for the technocracy. However, for a few years, with the rise of populism, propaganda has invaded the fields that were typical of the technicians. In a way, the best propagandists of our time tend to superimpose both planes and subordinate technique to propaganda. This has a cost. An example of this occurred in late January 2019:

A return of billions of pesos was going to be made to Corona (Beer Company). The Supreme Court ruled the company’s request inadmissible. If that had been approved, we would have had to return billions of pesos. Why do I say it? Because money was saved by the responsible attitude of the Supreme Court. . . . (AMLO web)

Hours later, Grupo Modelo, producer of Corona beer, through a press release published in various media, clarified the information disclosed by President López Obrador:

Grupo Modelo: informs that the decision referred to today by the President of Mexico, Lic. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, does not correspond to any legal recourse filed by the company, but to the processes carried out by some former shareholders of the Group that today are not

related to it. (Pérez web)

President López Obrador admitted the next day (January 30) that he had been wrong about his claim about the Corona company. The event implies an error in the words of President López Obrador can harm the individuals or legal entities that are referred to which are immediately amplified by the media that distribute them throughout the country and abroad (web).

There are those who consider that the morning conference has become not only a mode of communication and propaganda, but also a method of government. This is often counterproductive. Days after López Obrador's first year ended, Salvador Camarena, the editorial writer for the newspaper *El Financiero*, wrote how the distinction between government and propaganda, between morning hours and the act of governing, has been erased:

There are plenary meetings of the cabinet where Andrés Manuel throws them the same speech that he then prescribes in the morning conferences. The same. With identical anecdotes and examples. In those meetings no one dares ask. Not when the instructions are confusing or unclear. The president spoke, and the others were silent.

It seems that the members of the cabinet have assumed that the act of governing must be subordinated to propaganda, and they have nothing to say. Governing from the morning conferences, says Cárdenas, beyond the "ridiculous" is "a strategic error where there will be no turning back so easily [...] The security cabinet would be a thousand times more useful working than wasting time sitting in a forum that is useless beyond the increased reflection of all its mistakes."

Other critics of the president have contextualized the morning conferences as part of a strategy, according to which López Obrador would be building a dictatorial regime in the style of Cuba or Venezuela. Let us remember that Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro also spoke a lot, they pretended to be wise on all issues. In this sense, Francisco Garfías from *Excelsior*, wrote:

The works and actions carried out in the first year of the so-called Fourth Transformation (AMLO administration) lead us to conclude that in Mexico we have a government attached to the Decalogue of populism [...] There is exaltation of the charismatic leader, use and abuse of the word in daily mornings, discretionary use of public resources, class hatred, fabrication of "truths."

2. The Rite

In principle, the "mañanera" is a press conference that seeks a dialogue, where the president or one of his collaborators exposes some topics, journalists ask about those topics or about others,² and the president or his collaborators respond. However, genuine dialogue implies freedom. This would mean that the criteria for the selection of their questions would be only journalistic, that is, what they consider to be relevant and that the public may be interested in, and not what the president may like or dislike. It would also mean that all journalists who request it are given the opportunity to ask and that, finally, the authorities respond honestly and with the greatest possible precision. However, these characteristics do not appear in the morning conferences.

Instead of a free dialogue, what we have is a ritual. Specifically, it is a sacrificial rite. To clarify our conceptual framework, we resort to Mimetic Theory, according to which, the imitative nature of

the human being leads him to have conflicts and one of the most important functions of culture is precisely to contain the virulence and frequency of said conflicts.

Culture is understood as the formation of “differentiations” between good and evil; gods and men, members of different castes, the human and the animal, between what each one has, according to their role in society and the cosmos, prohibited and allowed, between pacifying violence and violence that produces chaos; between the pure and the impure; between law and crime; positive imitation and negative imitation, explicitly mentioned in this way: “Imitation leads to conflict, but it is also the foundation of all cultural transmission [...] (Girard 11).

Mimetic Theory distinguishes spontaneous violence from ritualized violence. The first is uncontrollable, natural, causes unforeseen damage; while the second is theatrical, their deaths are determined by a previous script. The first just happens, the second is carried out to prevent the first from appearing. The first attacks indiscriminately, chooses its victims at random, is simply violence; the second focuses on one or a few and its purpose is to pacify, set an example of what would happen if differences were lost and prevent further violence. In short: “to try to prevent unpredictable—and frequent—episodes of mimetic violence, cultures organize planned, controlled, on fixed dates, ritualized moments of violence” (67). Culture, when it works properly, achieves that, nine times out of ten, “imitation does not imply rivalry” (78).

Girard highlights the spontaneous, unanimous, hazardous, and frenetic character of the first lynching to account for the radical and chaotic disorganization of the mimetic crisis that engenders it. The French author uses numerous examples of myths involving murder, stoning, falling, immolation, incest, unbridled sexuality, parricide, and so on. An example that he repeatedly mentions is that of Euripides’s *The Bacchae*, a ritual that represents a deep violent undifferentiation.

The central theme of *The Bacchae* is the party, a ritual destined to recall the mimetic crisis through undifferentiation in the loss of hierarchies. The rich disguise themselves as poor and the poor simulate wealth. Dances and costumes achieve a cathartic effect that blurs individual personalities in monstrous forms. Order is constantly violated in an excess that not only allows the breaking of normality but demands it. The leaders are covered with garlands and impregnated by the masses. In these carnivals the sacrificial figure is always present. An animal or human being is violated and sometimes killed at the highest point of exaltation. The fury of the participants is unloaded again on a victim who replaces them.

But ritual is a controlled disorganization that no longer carries the true danger of the original mimetic crisis; that is to say, that the community does not carry out the murder that purges it of the evils and the consequent sacralization of the scapegoat. It is worth mentioning that, after chaotic simulation ritual violence, there are long periods of measure and purification, which aim to control the festive delirium and prevent violence from escaping cultural limits (Márquez et al. 74).

Mimetic Theory establishes an economy of violence: for the majority part of the group to survive, it is convenient that one or a few to die. With the death of one the death of the others is saved. Sacrifice contains a logic of substitution. It is about “externalizing violence,” about getting rid of our dark side, even symbolically. Instead of blaming ourselves for social ills and even for the ills in our own lives, we blame someone whom we have turned into an outsider: “when violence within the group reaches a fever pitch, it must be redirected outward or concentrated towards one of the individuals in the community who, from the moment he is chosen as a scapegoat, becomes an outsider” (68).

The Mimetic Theory calls the sacrificial figure the scapegoat. This Theory accurately condenses the four moments or stereotypes of the persecution to explain the mechanism of the scapegoat:

1) the stereotype of the crisis, in which the dissolution of social differences can destroy the cultural order of the community; 2) the stereotype of the accusation, where the group tries to find the causes of the chaos by attributing it to acts of violence, sexual crimes or some form of sacrilege; 3) that of the selection of victims, in which an individual or group is singled out for their differences with respect to the rest of the community or any other characteristic that makes them stand out. The usual victims are minority or foreign groups, people with physical differences such as deformations, women, vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly; or people with prominent social position such as kings, aristocrats and rich; 4) that of violence where the entire community acts against the accused to eliminate evil. (72)

According to the Mimetic Theory, there is a common path that the development of societies follows in relation to the control and lack of control of violence. This route is circular, it begins and ends where the attention and narration are concentrated:

1) violent mimetic disorder; 2) imitation to blame one, which begins the process of exteriorization or self-exteriorization of violence; 3) lynching of that “external being, who may be a god or even an envious outcast”; 4) establishment of an order that is the product of the miraculous sacrifice, which transforms the murdered diabolical culprit into a holy restorer of order; 5) maintenance of order through positive imitations—i.e. prohibitions, non-conflict mediators, exchanges—and violent rituals that contain violence; 6) wear and tear of order due to internal factors or failure of order due to new external challenges; 7) violent mimetic disorder; 8) imitation to blame one [...] (77)

Mimetic Theory establishes a difference between simple or mythical societies and complex or demystifying societies. In the former there is a consensus around who should be slain, who is to blame; while in the latter that consensus no longer exists and, therefore, the sacrificial mechanism is more complex than in the former; particularly when society is divided into parties, each of those parties chooses its competitor as the real culprit. Bad for some is good for others. In some respects, good and evil are relativized.

As long as there is no consensus around who is, or who are the culprits, these only work to pacify certain groups and not the entire corpus of society. The pacification within these groups is partial because there is always the possibility that other versions about the origin of evil will filter between these groups. Worse still when groups or entire categories of people are chosen as scapegoats, since they usually have a way of defending themselves, of blaming those who accuse them, of being the real culprits. Therefore, such groups are not a good scapegoat.

In such a way that, in the context of complex societies, “weak scapegoats” emerge, to whom it is better only to immolate themselves in the media. Trying to bring violence to the field of events is usually very dangerous in the face of enemies with retaliation capabilities.

In complex societies, especially democratic ones, competition between different parties produces weak scapegoats, with whom the possibility of negotiating and living together is never broken. They scapegoat each other, but only on symbolic terrain, with precise limits that do not allow for violent escalation. When a group chooses a scapegoat from another group, it must do so in such a way that the selected victim does not have the full support of those in their own group. Former leaders are elected and are not leaders.

3. The Rite of Morning Conferences: Control of Time and Space

López Obrador understands the importance, for his own legitimacy, of the use of scapegoats. Likewise, he knows that to maintain order, the threat of violence is preferable to violence, ritual sacrifice than natural sacrifice. That is why he plans his morning conferences as a staging, where he usually controls time and space. Thus, he has the power to select the most convenient explanations of national problems; the power to select the victims to immolate; and to establish the criteria for judging good and evil.

Control of space during “mañaneras” begins with the accommodation of journalists. In the first four rows there are usually journalists who are unrecognized by their own union; that is to say, suspicious journalists, from media of little importance; useful journalists to the president. They are given the floor on more occasions, they are the ones who ask the most questions (Estrada). Their questions are comfortable for López Obrador (SPIN-TCP, “Infografía 14”).

Rows 5, 6, and 7 are usually occupied by newspaper reporters, the 8th by television envoys, the 9th by radio station reporters, and the 10th by magazines (“Infografía 100”). 80% of the journalists to whom the president gives the floor, are seated in the first two rows and to each one he responds, on average, for 12 minutes (“Infografía 4”). This is not common practice in other democracies:

Contrary to what is observed, for example, in the United States, where the press with the largest audience is the one that permanently has preferential places (first row) in the White House press room, AMLO chooses to answer questions from journalists of digital media who, even in the conferences outside the National Palace, in the military barracks in the states, also occupy the places of the first row. (Estrada web)

Carlos Marín, from Milenio, has dedicated some of his opinion articles to the performance of journalists in a way, as he points out in his text of October 28, 2019:

On the same October 23 that I dealt with the embarrassing participation of “false journalists” in the early conferences of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the aforementioned Marco Olvera uploaded a letter to Twitter [...].

I reproduce the text because I honor the right of reply (I unwittingly deduce the irony of the start of a guy, as you will see, rather hypocritical):

I appreciate that you take the time to analyze my interventions in the morning conference with the President of the Republic. That you, a reporter with a long history, dedicate your column to my work really flatters me. However, his text says “he sneaks in among genuine reporters.” I ask you! How do you determine who the “genuine reporters” are? [...] Those practices in which only the media owned by large companies had the right to ask questions [...] ended. Finally, knowing that he is a great reporter, I ask him to investigate further, as he says that I am accredited by an electronic newspaper of which I am no longer part [...].

Indeed, I found out later, this fraudulent reporter (because his thing is to act as a presidential mat) arrived in the morning as a correspondent for Radio Latino Inc., but when he was discovered links as a propagandist for René Bejarano, he was fired. He continues to go to the National Palace with a guest badge and as a “correspondent” from *Bajo Palabra* (a digital newspaper from Guerrero).

Regarding a car accident suffered by a group of journalists covering the president's tours, Marín wrote:

It is no coincidence that none of the phonies with the right of way to the morning press conferences are among the genuine reporters who survived the overturning of the rickety truck they were traveling in on Saturday while covering Andrés Manuel López Obrador's tour of Sonora. They are in good health because they only 'work' as jesters for two or three hours from Monday to Friday, they never cover their tours of the country, since their real task is to sit in the first two rows destined for 'the press' to formulate impertinent nonsense with the sinister aim of preventing the authentic journalists from covering presidential activities in a professional manner. ("Olvera")

Controlling those who are, speak and take time in the morning conferences has even become very hard. As in the case of Luis Cardona, a correspondent for *Option*, from Chihuahua, whose accreditation to attend said conference was withdrawn for asking an uncomfortable question (Cárdenas).

It is worth asking, what is control in the morning conferences for? To manipulate perception. However, it is curious that citizens tend to evaluate the actual policies of the government in a different way than the morning propaganda. This can be seen in the *El Financiero* survey published on November 26, 2019, 52% approve of the morning conferences but only 39% believe that the economy is doing well, while only 17% support its policies against corruption, 15% those of security and 12% those of combating poverty (Aguilar).

4. The Logic of Institutions

In morning conferences, it is common for López Obrador to evade his responsibility as ruler in terms of accountability. And he does it in the following ways:

- 1) Through the control of time and space: In this way, he selects the topics and angles that best suit him, even to the point of diverting attention in a grotesque fashion.
- 2) When something objectionable appears, he blames the rulers of the past, specifically those who ruled in what he calls "the neoliberal period," that is, the members of the "power mafia." He even associates some uncomfortable journalists with said mafia and disqualifies his arguments *ad hominem*.
- 3) Faced with issues in which it is very difficult to avoid the fact that the fault lies with his own government, he simply denies the information, even where it is obtained from official sources; he offers the strange formula of "I have other data" or he responds with phrases that are too general or impossible to verify, or with promises and commitments. In fact, on average, per conference, 39 of his claims are unverifiable or non-falsifiable; 13 are promises, 6 are commitments, and 5 are false. (SPIN-TCP, "Infografía 16").

5. Everything under Control

It is always about avoiding any responsibility and fallibility. If, as Mimetic Theory says, the monarch must look for a substitute so as not to be the one sacrificed himself, López Obrador is a master of the use of the substitute mechanism. The first substitution is that of the hurtful reality for

a comfortable reality, which instead of emphasizing the failures of the government, emphasizes its achievements, however questionable or minute they may be.

In this regard, we have an example of the morning conference of October 8, 2019, when in the midst of the uproar caused by questions about the poor economic and security results, he took advantage of the journalists' question, to elaborate on a topic that in almost any other context would have merited at most one statement: the transfer of the remains of the singer José José to Mexican territory:

Interlocutor: Well, President. One question only on an issue that has been in public opinion for several days and that the government of the Republic touches on the second time yesterday, has to do with José Rómulo Sosa. A question. The transfer of the remains of the Mexican artist, who will run it? Will the Mexican government transfer them? If this is the scenario, will it be on an official aircraft, on commercial flight? If you could clarify those doubts that the statement from the Ministry of Culture does not address.

President López Obrador: Well, the family members asked the Secretary of Defense for the body of José José to be transferred on an Air Force plane. They informed me about this request and I authorized it, as long as an agreement was reached between the family members, that is, that we did not participate in the decision that was made by the family members. The consul in Miami has been helping with everything, we have information on that, and if an agreement is reached, we are going to move the body, the remains, if his relatives consider it appropriate. That is a decision we have made.

Interlocutor: In this sense also, given the feelings of many Mexicans, the Mexican government has been asked if it could guarantee or mediate so that this agreement is effectively reached that the order of things is changed, that is, that the mortal remains arrive to Mexico and later they will move for cremation. Could this be or is it completely out of the question in legal terms?

President López Obrador: The consul is working on it [...]. He has been helping and has been in communication with the family.

And what I can do is an appeal, an request to the relatives, because the singer José José is a character of all Mexicans, he already belongs to many Mexicans, now it is in the public domain, like the people loved by Mexicans. Yes, of course, the main thing is the family members, but also to consider that there is a general interest, the interest of the people, those who enjoyed it, enjoyed it, those who wanted it, those who continue to listen to it. So, take that into account. Hence why the transfer in an Air Force plane is authorized, because he is an artist; and it can be said that in a strict sense he is just another singer and why not others, but, well, we have to make decisions.

I consider that Juan Gabriel,—although there is also controversy about that—was an extraordinary composer and singer, further back: Jorge Negrete, Pedro Infante, of course others, the composer from Guanajuato, José Alfredo, popular poet, and José José, and others, many more before, Agustín Lara, our artistic life, why forget them? Recognize them. In addition, the case of José José also has a very human element of how he dealt with his illness, how despite his illness he wanted to continue singing, that is, he wanted to continue singing, it was a great effort, with a lot of feeling. So, hopefully the family members agree, I think they will achieve it.

Interlocutor: The Mexican government would give all the guarantees to the relatives.

President López Obrador: Of course, all the support, and the ceremony would also take place here. They asked me if Bellas Artes could be used. [...] Bellas Artes was used when Frida Kahlo, Bellas Artes was used ... look at that time, we have already talked about it, for allowing Frida

to be paid a tribute in Bellas Artes, they even ran to the director of Bellas Artes, my countryman Andrés Iduarte, great writer, our countryman. And I remember that as head of government I also attended tributes there, in Bellas Artes, when Octavio Paz, María Félix, recently . . . but Juan Gabriel, Bellas Artes, is for all Mexicans, and it is for the fine arts or the arts more, let's say, sublime, and folk art. Imagine, Monsiváis, who spent his whole life collecting, obtaining pieces of popular art. . . that is, if we get into the field of defining art and defining culture, it is something else. In this case, we see well about José José, whoever is brought. We cannot get to comment on matters that correspond to the family, nothing more, exhort them that if there are differences—which are in all families too—that they make a truce, that the tribute be made and then if they decide to continue with their differences are within their rights, but let's see if they can be reconciled on this matter.

Interlocutor: Thank you very much, President.

Question: Excuse me, good morning, President of Mexico, Carlos Pozos from . . . excuse me, colleagues.

President López Obrador: Go ahead.

Interlocutor: It is just that my colleagues get upset because I ask a question.

President López Obrador: Don't listen to them, don't listen to them. (AMLO web)

While the president dedicates his time to this type of explanation, homicides continue to rise. In the space of one morning conference, six Mexicans are murdered on average. As noted above, AMLO attempts to control the agenda by controlling the time and space given to journalists in the conference, almost always with successfully. However, every rite has its risks. When violence enters the game, it can take sinister forms and eat away at the rules of ritual. Let us see how this happened on October 31, 2019.

Context first. A week and a half after the *culiacanazo*, that is, the failed operation in which federal forces captured one of Chapo Guzmán's sons, and then released him due to the violent reaction of the Sinaloa Cartel, which attacked the local population and provoked the escape from the Culiacán prison. A week of explanations passed by the federal government, increasingly contradictory and implausible about how such a blunder happened, about those responsible for the operation and the bad planning.

Towards the morning conference of October 31, doubts continued in the environment, it was imperative to have more information to begin to build a credible narrative, in the face of such a devastating event. A good explanation was needed as to why the Mexican State had given in to the criminals. In that context, the following occurred:

The conference began in the style that has predominated in these exercises: with the president giving the floor to those attendees who usually give him soft jabs, typical of a batting practice, so that the Executive blows the wall [...].

And so, they asked him a series of questions on anodyne subjects, such as the old subject of a video about the simulation of an aerial hijacking or the result of the World Series of baseball and others that had nothing to do with the Culiacanazo. After half an hour, the exasperation grew in the Treasury Room and several reporters who had not been given the floor began to shout their questions without waiting for the microphone.

Seeing this, the president set out to sail into the storm. "Let's get on with it. We have time, slowly. . . ."

Gradually, the tone of the questions and answers was leveling up.

“Who gave the order for the operation?”—Asked Nelly San Martín, from the *Proceso* magazine.

“It was explained yesterday,” López Obrador refused to respond a question that was not asked before.

—No, no responsibilities were established.

Already annoyed, the president replied: “Ah, no, now we talk. No, no, no, we are not going to leave any loose ends, because we do not want to give rise to yellowing, with all due respect, or to any invention.”

And he passed the word to General Luis Crescencio Sandoval, present there, like the rest of the members of the Security Cabinet. The soldier made a summary of the report of events that had been presented the day before, but the reporter demanded that the question be answered bluntly:

“Wait,” intervened the president, “we are going to answer everything. Look, General, if you give the name of the person in charge of the operation.”

And Sandoval had no choice but to reveal the name of the head of the Drug Trafficking Information and Analysis Group (GIAN), an organization that has managed to arrest various drug lords in recent years [...].

The data, which I will not repeat, would later cause legislators and specialists to accuse the president of endangering, with his order, the security of the aforementioned military man.

But the thing would not end there. Faced with new questions, López Obrador said that the reporters were “very excited,” launched a “enough is enough!”, Criticized the coverage that different media had given to the Culiacanazo and cited a phrase that Gustavo A. Madero foisted on the journalists who were criticizing the management of his brother, martyr President Francisco I. Madero: “They bite the hand of whoever took the muzzle from them.” (Beltrán Del Río, “En buen plan”)

Thus, the president who tried to control time and space, who sought to evade violence, ended up violating state secrets and stood up to journalists. An extraordinary situation like the *culiacanazo*, complicated with bad explanations, exasperated journalists. In the weeks that followed, López Obrador looked broken. He lost control of the schedule and, above all, control of substitutions. For a few weeks, on the symbolic level, he became the scapegoat; this only worsened after the organized crime attack in Bavispe, against members of the Mormon Mexican-American family, LeBarón.

However, the situation became more complex when Genaro García Luna, who was Secretary of Security during Felipe Calderón’s administration (2006-2012), was arrested in the United States for links to drug trafficking. Let us remember that Calderón defeated López Obrador in the 2006 presidential elections, though López Obrador never admitted his defeat and accused Calderón of fraud. Since then, there has been a mimetic rivalry that continues to this day.

The arrest of García Luna has led the *lopezobradoristas* (supporters of President López Obrador) to speculate on the possibility that, derived from the confessions of the ex-secretary, Calderón himself is linked to atrocious crimes. However, none of that has happened. As Marín, editorial writer from *Milenio*, explains in his note of December 12, 2019:

Genaro García Luna is accused of facilitating drug smuggling into the United States, receiving bribes and having “protected” the Joaquín Guzmán Loera gang [...]. Credit is given to the stories of a former friend of Chapo Guzmán: Jesús Reynaldo El Rey Zambada García, Ismael

El Mayo Zambada's brother, who in the trial against his comrade El Chapo, accused García Luna. There is much that does not fit in what was propagated between Tuesday and Wednesday. During the defendant's tenure as director of the Federal Investigation Agency (with Vicente Fox) and secretary of Public Security (with Felipe Calderón), that same witness Zambada was captured and extradited to the United States. And his gang seized the largest shipment of cocaine in the world (23 and a half tons).

However, the arrest and accusations are enough for President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to say that it shows that "the main problem in the country was corruption."

In contrast was the opinion of the former head of International Operations of the Drug Enforcement Administration (the U.S. anti-drug agency known by its acronym DEA), Mike Vigil: "I never saw any problem of corruption, no problem that compromised any of our operations. We probably work better with him (García Luna) than with any other Mexican official." The presumption of innocence (the touchstone of the new and civilizing Mexican Criminal Justice System) is not taken into account by the federal Secretary of Security, Alfonso Durazo, who tweeted: "There are those who turned with fierce nostalgia towards the 'security' strategy of the past; today's arrest has reduced it to the tragic official protection of the Calderón government for the Sinaloa cartel. This fact alone reflects the disaster we inherited in this matter." ("Sin juicio aún")

Furthermore, on the morning conference of December 11, 2019, President López Obrador hinted not only at García Luna's guilt, but also, by a kind of contagion, from his former bosses. This is how one of his journalists asked him:

President López Obrador: García Luna, I repeat, is allegedly responsible for the crime.

Question: At the door of a maxiproces with the arrest of García Luna ... well, García Luna, we must remember him, he comes from Fox, he was the head of the AFI (Federal Investigation Agency), and he even made a hymn to the AFI so that he would have esprit de corps, and then comes with the Secretary of Public Security. The confrontation between García Luna and Santiago Vasconcelos was known.

It was said in the former Attorney General's Office that García Luna defended Joaquín "el Chapo" Guzmán and that the rest of the SIEDO (Special Agency for the Investigation of Organized Crime) was dedicated to fighting the rest of the criminal organizations. (AMLO web)

And the guilt, or possible guilt, does not end with García Luna and his former bosses, but also includes other critics of López Obrador:

And the truth is that (the capture of García Luna) is a defeat to an authoritarian, corrupt regime. It is an element of proof that this model failed ... because there are still those who insist, insist that that was the option, that was the alternative.

I remember that when we were in the opposition proposing that the war (against organized crime) should stop—because I have proof, I was one of the first, if not the first to oppose this irresponsible strategy—when we were at it, García Luna used to be appreciated by the journalist, not all of them, but by the most famous. (AMLO web)

But when it comes to speculation, the most well-founded is that of the journalist Carlos Puig, an

expert on the American justice system:

The District Attorney for the Eastern District of New York and the defense of Genaro García Luna have asked the court to freeze the legal times to start the trial against the former secretary of Federal Public Safety [...]. They argue that both parties have begun negotiations for a plea agreement, that would avoid a public trial in front of a jury. Most of the accusations in the United States end in a similar agreement; nine out of 10 in federal courts like the one in which García Luna is prosecuted. The negotiation does not imply that the accused will become an informant or protected witness [...].

It could happen, but that has to do with whether the prosecution is interested in the information for other cases that it has advanced or has in its sights [...].

In most cases, the agreement does not imply that. The negotiation that he has initiated has to do with the quality of the evidence against the accused and the strength and quality of the evidence that the defense could present on behalf of his client, and hence the probability that in a trial the prosecution could losing cases, which every prosecution hates. The agreements reduce costs and uncertainty because part of the negotiation includes a sentencing recommendation [...]. In these weeks, the prosecution will have to show the defense what its main evidence, its witnesses, and from there begins the negotiation that could end, as most of these negotiations conclude, with the withdrawal of the most serious charges and the acceptance of guilt on the part of the accused of a lesser charge (and sentence) [...]. And yes, he could tell the prosecutors things, but he could also negotiate never to appear as a witness in another process [...]. If I had to bet, I'd bet that García Luna will negotiate a deal and keep quiet.

García Luna, although he does not say anything relevant to link Felipe Calderón with any crime, even if he reaches an agreement with the U.S. justice and remains silent, he will not cease to be one of Morena's favorite scapegoats. It is very useful to think of Calderón's "super police" as the origin of the violence in Mexico, especially in light of the terrible results in the matter during the first fourteen months of the government of President López Obrador.

Given the control of time, space and the word, in the morning conferences there has been no one to make a defense or a serious question about García Luna. But the possibility of loophole is there. Weeks go by and nothing is done. So far, the former Secretary of Security has not declared anything that incriminates him or that he really links him to drug traffickers. Worse still, given the results in terms of violence, there is no evidence that the strategy against organized crime of the López Obrador government is better than that of Felipe Calderón.

6. Blame It on the Neoliberal Past

Regarding the second argument, in which the "mafia of power" is blamed of the evils of our present, two common expressions in the morning conferences should be mentioned:

1) "Now it's different," as in the conference on October 25, 2019, when he stated: "The only thing that angers us is that they want to compare us with our adversaries, with the conservatives, with those who are no longer in government." And also, in the one of November 25, 2019, when he pointed out "we are not cheats, we are not like those who were before, those who stole elections

and bought votes, falsified minutes and imposed presidents of the Republic, and governors and municipal presidents, or was that already been forgotten? [...]"

2) "Neoliberal," followed or preceded by expressions that denote the current crisis, policy only applied "on my compadre's oxen," [...] disintegration of families, migration due to lack of opportunities, economic decline, the minimum wage lost its value. Neoliberals dictated the agenda from abroad, violation of rights, they thrived with the government, abusive business under the protection of the government, vested interests, structural reforms, and the privatization of education. President López Obrador also tends to accompany the term neoliberalism with adjectives such as vice, deformation, disaster, failure, bankruptcy, backwardness, corruption, poor service, conservative policy, neo-Porfirist, looter, fatal, poverty and inequality (AMLO web).

In the following quote, extracted from the morning conference of July 15, 2019, we find a synthesis on the condemnation of neoliberalism:

Why do they miss each other?

I understand that there is a lot of nostalgia for neoliberalism, it lasted 36 years, I have explained it here, the Porfiriato was 34 years.

I wrote a book called *Neoliberalism, Neoporfirism*, because I consider, neoliberalism to be neoporfirism. It is already a lived process, similar in Mexico, resurrected, I explain it there.

And, well, it is not easy to end 36 years of an economic model with a policy of looting. They tell me: "You talk too much about neoliberalism" Yes, because it is synonymous with corruption. Look at how far the alienation reached that there was talk of privatizing as something normal.

What is privatization?

You have to look it up in the dictionary, it means turning the public into private, because that's what the neo-liberal, neo-Porfirian policy consisted of. That no longer exists.

I apologize for what it means to apply a new economic policy, we are going to clarify it more and more, it is indispensable. And it is very good that this debate takes place, because we want to make the development plan widely known, because there are the guidelines, as the technocrats would say, the new paradigms, there is the new.

What about neoliberal politics? That the agenda that was applied was not the one that was sent to us from abroad? Where do the so-called structural reforms come from? Was that born in Mexico? Was it conceived in our country?

And that was what was applied, that was the agenda, it was on the national agenda, in the neoliberal period, the issue of corruption; I am telling you that in 25 years corruption or acts of corruption were not considered a serious crime.

What wonder if people voted for real change and want corruption to end? What is the disagreement? What did they think then? That I was going to get here and that I was going to gloat over being the president of Mexico, and with the paraphernalia of power and that I was not going to like everyone? No, the mandate is to transform and they are telling me about it on the street. [...] (AMLO web)

López Obrador knows that sometimes blaming this abstract cluster called neoliberalism can be insufficient and requires sacrificing flesh and blood victims, more satisfactory for an audience hungry for blood, revenge and even justice! In the morning conference on August 1, 2019, he stated:

I suggested that, in effect, if Article 35 of the Constitution was reformed and if it was necessary, if the people requested it, that they be consulted, if the ex-presidents of the neoliberal period from Salinas to Peña were tried, and I said publicly that I was in favor of not doing it, because it was necessary to look forward. However, in democracy the people rule. (web)

Thus, on September 13, President López Obrador insisted on the purity of his government in contrast to the impurity of previous governments. An impurity due to lack of clear differentiations, due to promiscuity between the public and private sectors. Various commentators have noted that, if that is what it is about, AMLO's government is actually as impure as that of its predecessors.

As far as the government of the Fourth Transformation goes, there is no real separation of economic power and political power. In any case, in the morning conference he has insisted that he will separate economic power from political power, the impure from the pure (IMCO web).³ Although in fact he has been seen with the same characters that at some point he called the "power mafia," which became a concept so malleable that it responds to those who are not with him, such as his reference to "conservatives" (SPIN-TCP, "Infografía 14"):⁴

I am going to say it with respect, but during the government of President Zedillo National Railways are delivered; and he finishes and goes to work as a counselor to one of the companies that stayed with the National Railways, to a foreign company.

Almost all those who were Finance Secretaries in the neoliberal period working with companies or banks, banks that they rescued with public money, with Fobaproa (Monetary Fund for Saves Protection). The secretaries of Energy, directors of Pemex, all working in oil companies as advisers, as members of the council, a former president, a member of a council of a foreign company dedicated to selling electricity to the government. What's that?

There has to be a sharp separation. One thing is the public function, the public service, and another thing is the private sector. There must not be this hodgepodge, this conspiracy [...].

During the neoliberal period there were pressure groups that even dominated the parties, which were above the parties, and aligned them and called them to be alliances against us.

What happens is that now they have not been able to articulate and are, with all due respect, morally defeated. As Juárez said: "a triumph of the reaction is morally impossible." (AMLO web)

The explanation of the neoliberal past as the source of all the evils of the present tends to run out as time passes. Little by little it begins to be perceived that the responsibilities of the present belong to the government itself. The present has more weight in decision-making and in the formulation of opinions than the past.

7. "I Have Other Data"

In addition to the *culiacanazo* crisis, there is another emblematic moment of loss of control of time, space and speech during the morning conference. Another moment in which the president lost his character as a sacrificial priest to become the sacrificed victim himself. It is necessary to reiterate that all this is symbolic.

This is when the president indicates that he has other data, regardless of whether what is shown comes from the government's own figures, he can even deny even his own cabinet members. Arguing

with figures that are never shown beyond the “official” ones is a comfortable escape route in the face of questions. President does not argue with different interpretations about the data, something that is common among governments as a mechanism to present better results among one period or another, but simply from their own perceptions and refers to “figures that do not exist.”

Indicating “the other data” has become a daily part of government dynamics that in the Google search engine there are more than 50 thousand results with the combination “I have other data” and AMLO. In this sense, the journalist Jorge Ramos appeared on Friday, April 12, 2019, in the morning conference to question the president about the security figures:

During their first three months, they murdered 8,524 Mexicans. If the figures continue the same, 2019 is going to be the bloodiest and most violent year in the modern history of Mexico [...] What are you going to do in the short term so that they do not kill so many Mexicans and so that Mexico does not continue to be one of the most dangerous countries in the world to practice journalism? asked Ramos.

AMLO replied that the homicide figures have not risen during his administration. “We have controlled the situation according to our data,” said the president, but received a reply: “The data that I have says otherwise, they are not under control, on the contrary, many Mexicans continue to die,” Ramos replied.

—The figures indicate that the number of murders continues to increase, 8,524 in the first three months, Jorge Ramos said.

—They have not increased, assured AMLO.

—“They have increased of course, of course they have,” Ramos replied.

—“No, I have other information,” replied the president. (Diario23 web)

This case was a turning point in the face of “data that does not exist,” because the journalist rebuked him and spoke with him, as happened in the case of the *culiacanzo*. In general, the reference to other data is an effective way to evade reality in most cases. Only in the face of very serious events and with the expertise of journalists when they are lucky enough to be given the floor, was a questioning been achieved that takes the president off balance to hear an argument that contradicts his beliefs and perceptions.

The president maintains the management of time and space, the neoliberal past appears daily as the worst of evils and the other data is the measure of all things. However, in a year we have seen important moments of lack of control in which the scenario cannot always be fully managed, because reality prevails and makes president the scapegoat. Thus, throughout this analysis it is important to leave the question in Girardian terms of what is more sacrificial, reality or the president’s perceptions?

Notes

1. We gave thanks to Valeria Carreón for helping us with the translation.
2. There have been questions about the possibility that pop singer Juan Gabriel is still alive, flattery from “journalists” when comparing AMLO to a Kenyan runner, and even requests for publicity for other media beyond those they criticize.
3. Until November 2019, purchases without bidding have been 77%, even higher than in previous six-year terms that between 2010 and 2018 was 72%.
4. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has used the phrase neoliberal 651 and conservatives 606 times until October 31, 2019.

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